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**STRUGGLING FOR CHANGE: APPLYING THE BUREAUCRATIC  
MODEL TO U.S. POLICY TOWARD CUBA**

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## Struggling for Change Applying the Bureaucratic Model to U S Policy Toward Cuba

By Leslie Bassett

There are few hardy perennials in foreign policy, but over the last thirty years you could go to the bank on two First, every incoming president would make a secret vow not to be entrapped by his national security bureaucracies – State, CIA, and Defense Second, each administration would be blindsided by a Cuba event unforeseen by a narrow but enduring embargo policy which failed over three decades to overthrow Cuban leader Fidel Castro Although the memoirs have yet to be written, one suspects that President Clinton, who borrowed so heavily from President Carter's national security staff, may also have borrowed the Georgian governor's skepticism of at least the State Department Nonetheless, like many of its predecessors, the Clinton Administration would default to a mechanism of foreign policy making that corresponds to the bureaucratic model described by Graham Allison.<sup>1</sup> In short, a select group of key players determined by "where they sit," (State, NSC, at times Defense and Justice on Cuba matters) would make policy decisions but leave implementation to entrenched careerists with a long history of supporting the status quo

The Clinton Administration's effort to redefine our policy on Cuba in terms of reaching out to the Cuban people demonstrates the pitfalls as well as the limited possibilities the bureaucratic approach offers for significant change of long-standing policies The first problem is one Allison identified – having implementation fall short of policy goals, which was the case in the Administration's response to the August 1994 rafter crisis The second is to be trapped by bureaucratic inertia, in which a policy means

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<sup>1</sup> Graham T Allison, Essence of Decision (Boston, Little Brown ) 1971

(the embargo) becomes an end in itself, in this case enshrined by Helms-Burton legislation. A third problem endemic to the model is that the bureaucratic process tends to discount events in the target country (ie Cuba) in order to give weight to bureaucratic objectives (keeping control of action channels, satisfying stakeholders etc ). The Clinton effort suffered from all three of these shortcomings. However, after two deviations from its stated objective, the Administration found the ability within the same model to make minor adjustments to Cuba policy effective – and laid the groundwork for future changes. The lesson to be drawn is that policy driven by bureaucratic imperatives risks being trapped in preserving the status quo, but strong leadership from the highest levels combined with good management can make gradual change both possible and constructive. Short of a Clinton decision to visit Havana (a la Nixon to China) incremental change with the grudging support of the bureaucracy is the best one can hope for in the near term.

#### Bureaucratic Model: Players in the Game

Without revisiting Allison completely, suffice it to say that numerous bureaucratic entities have had a stake in enforcing the embargo on Cuba since its inception. These entities from within as well as outside the government have been managed by the Coordinator for Cuban Affairs in the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs (known as ARA/CCA) at the State Department for at least the last two decades. Directors of ARA/CCA have become the point persons for the Cuban-American community, the Hill, Hispanic media, business, and academics as well as interagency players. This is an unusual arrangement made necessary in part by the need to constrain Cuban officials' contacts with the range of American bureaucracies with which they would normally have

to deal – our diplomats in Havana remain similarly constrained. Over time, however, the Director of ARA/CCA has become a significant figure in circles where Cuba issues dominate, and the incumbent has tended to view the satisfaction of these constituencies as a bellwether of success or failure. In this regard the influential Cuban-American communities in Miami and New Jersey remain crucial.

As the Clinton Administration came into office key appointees had long histories of advocating a policy beyond the embargo to reach out to – rather than isolate – the Cuban people. National Security Adviser Tony Lake was a known critic of Republican policies in Latin America. National Security Council Senior Directors Mort Halperin and Richard Feinberg were prone to encourage new thinking on Cuba. Under Secretary for Political Affairs appointee Peter Tarnoff had conducted secret talks with the Cubans while serving as the Executive Secretary of the Department of State during the Carter years.<sup>2</sup> Tarnoff came back to the Department of State in 1992 as part of an Administration primed to try again. The purported aim was to prepare a “soft landing” for Cuba in the event of Castro’s death or incapacity by building political space and, with time, democratic grassroots organizations.

#### Migration Crisis 1994: Secrecy Doesn’t Sell

By 1994 Tarnoff was in erratic, secret contact with Cuban official Ricardo Alarcon. The only administration officials privy to the substance of these talks initially were NSA Lake, his deputy Sandy Berger, Halperin and the Secretary of State. The secrecy was crucial to prevent leaks from those vested in the current policy, including working levels at the State Department charged with coordinating implementation of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ironically, those talks became pointless after the Mariel crisis and were broken off without achieving any results.

embargo and who were viewed (correctly) as sympathetic to Cuban-American groups which harshly opposed any easing of strict isolation of Castro and his regime

However, by the summer of 1994 hundreds of Cuban rafters were taking to the high seas in the hopes of landing in the U S (where special legislation automatically granted them residency privileges) and the Tarnoff-Alarcon conversations focused on a solution to this problem. In late 1994 Tarnoff and Alarcon concluded secret talks which resulted in an unprecedented agreement to direct migration into safe channels <sup>3</sup>

This first cooperative effort with the Cuban government since the Bay of Pigs was intended, beyond providing a solution to the migration crisis, to mark an initial step in establishing mutual confidence and trust. The well being of returned rafters would be monitored by U S Interest Section personnel who would be allowed unparalleled travel authority within Cuba to verify first-hand the returnees' well being. It was not unreasonable to expect that successful implementation of the accord –reviewed every six months by unprecedented meetings between the two sides – could lead to further cooperative efforts that would, in the U S. view, contribute to building political space inside Cuba. Whether this was more than a supposition between the two sides remains unclear.

However, the very secrecy of the process stalled this vision. Logistically, the lack of interagency coordination delayed Coast Guard and INS' ability to respond to immediate rafter incidents in accord with the agreement, prompting Cuban calls of bad faith. Our obligation to provide increased refugee and immigrant visas to Cubans was

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<sup>3</sup> The secret accord reached by the two offered an expedient solution to the rafter crisis for both sides. Cuban rafters would be in essence returned to Cuba without repercussion by Cuban authorities after a cursory interview by immigration and Coast Guard authorities to screen out those few who might face

complicated by a lack of infrastructure, personnel and necessary equipment. The political consequences were more dire. The lack of consultation with Florida politicians, the Cuban-American community, the State Department's working levels or a host of others caused a backlash unanticipated by the Administration, which expected praise, not blame. State's Cuba Coordinator and his deputy resigned their posts, Florida Governor Chiles offered faint praise, and Senator Bob Graham (R-FL) withdrew his tepid support after the Administration failed to identify any other Republicans who would praise the initiative. The Florida politicians' reticence reflected the outrage of the prominent Cuban-American community, which rejected the agreement and demanded to know what other "secret deals" the Clinton Administration had been brewing with Castro. Tarnoff was called to testify before committees in both houses of Congress, and even media reaction was harsh. In the face of the Administration's perceived perfidy, Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) and Rep. Dan Burton (R-IN) collaborated on a bill which sought to take U.S. policy toward Cuba out of the hands of the Executive. The Administration mustered all its bureaucratic resources (mostly lawyers) to confront this challenge.

While the Clinton Administration hoped to build the Alarcon contact into an agreement for limited political space for Cuban dissidents, it was hijacked by the raftier crisis and used for an expedient solution to a pressing domestic problem for both sides. The Clinton camp could count as a success that this first effort on Cuba clearly succeeded in evading vested interests within government organizations, opening the prospect for unusual solutions and preserving secrecy. The Administration failed to reap much benefit from its effort because it overlooked bureaucratic and special interests which were

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extraordinary persecution if returned to Cuba. The U.S. military base at Guantanamo would not longer be a safehaven for Cubans fleeing the Castro regime – nor would the State of Florida.

stakeholders in the issue and needed to be brought on board to ensure success at this initial stage and build support for future measures. Moreover, the selection of an Under Secretary as point person devalued the effort and encouraged critics to go for the jugular. Finally, the backlash was so severe that the Alarcon channel became exclusively a mechanism for dealing with rafter crises -- any larger agenda was preempted. The Administration learned these lessons, but was unable, as we shall see, to apply them immediately in the face of this backlash.

### Helms-Burton: Domestic Concerns Trump Foreign Policy Visions

The migration accord experience demonstrated to the Administration that a small group of advisors could develop a policy and keep it secret -- but implementation was clearly a tricky task. Logistical hurdles were easily overcome once the bureaucracy understood what was required, but political repercussions and the growing threat of the Helms-Burton proposed legislation were harder to repair. To contain the damage the White House appointed a special envoy, Richard Nuccio, and gave him offices in both the Old Executive Office Building (reporting to the National Security Adviser) and in the Department of State (reporting to the Secretary). This was intended to institutionalize the small-group formula by protecting key bureaucratic equities but at a high enough level that presidential prerogatives would be respected. Nuccio's mission was to contain the damage of the migration accords, prevent passage of Helms-Burton (which sought to further codify the embargo and forbade specific administration actions such as the provision of aid to Cuba until democracy had been restored), and lay the groundwork for outreach to the Cuban people -- the Administration's vernacular for a soft landing for a post-Castro Cuba.



Nuccio came on board in late 1995 and began to cultivate the Miami-New Jersey Cuban-American communities while working inside the National Security Council to develop outreach measures to implement inside Cuba. In February, 1996, however, after an aircraft piloted by two Cuban-Americans was shot down by the Cuban military the Administration reversed course. The President met with close advisers, including Berger, the Secretary of State and Nuccio, then held a session with Cuban-Americans and key members of Congress. The domestic repercussions of a mild response to the Cuban atrocity were made clear. Moreover, pressure for even more drastic measures, including military overthrow of the regime, was almost certainly postulated.<sup>4</sup> By the conclusion of those meetings the President had agreed to sign the Helms-Burton bill into law. The decision was announced within a week of the shoot down, and included imposition of additional sanctions against Cuba (i.e. suspension of charter flights and elimination of dollar remittances).

While this decision seems to take into account the interests of key bureaucratic stakeholders (the Hill, Cuban-Americans), the small group again neglected to consider all the angles. Nuccio resigned shortly after the announcement, signaling to many the end of the Administration's commitment to the soft-landing approach. His departure also signaled recognition that to be effective Cuba policy had to be restricted to the highest-level action channels. Domestic policy concerns outweighed the foreign policy vision that had driven the selection of Nuccio and the effort to persuade stakeholders to support further outreach to, rather than isolation of, Cuba. The trade and commerce agencies found their negotiating positions on Helms-Burton reversed by the President overnight,

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<sup>4</sup> Since the U.S. intervention in Haiti CANF leaders had been pressing the Administration to similarly "restore democracy" to Cuba.

and were forced to advocate what they had previously opposed. European allies and others prepared to file WTO actions against the trade sanction provisions of the legislation, while visa and travel provisions were vociferously criticized worldwide. The short term domestic gain satisfied immediate bureaucratic imperatives, but at a serious cost to the longer-term effort.

#### March 1998 Measures: Getting it Right a Little at a Time

But even then the Administration did not abandon hope. A small group of insiders continued to work at the NSC to develop measures that would recoup some ground lost after the February 1996 shutdown, and open the way for greater contact with the Cuban people. Helms-Burton preempted many options, but the authority of the Executive could still be applied to ease some restrictions. By late 1997 several packages of measures (ranging from the status quo ante the shoot down to a more fulsome export of medical, humanitarian and food supplies to the island) had been prepared and even reviewed by Berger, but none were shared with the rest of the concerned Executive agencies. It was decided that Secretary of State Albright, who had great credibility in Cuban-American communities, would be point person on any new Cuba initiatives. Her Counselor, Wendy Sherman, would coordinate implementation.

The lessons of the past were not lost on Sherman. Before the President made any decisions she pressed the Secretary to visit Miami on the second anniversary of the shutdown to take the pulse of the community. The Pope's January 1998 visit to Cuba had opened a window for U.S. initiative, and the Secretary's trip was designed to ensure any U.S. measures would have the support of the Cuban-American, the religious and the home-state political constituency. Once the trip was accomplished, the President

approved an option essentially restoring remittances, charter flights and a few other exchange relationships that had existed prior to the shoot down, and Sherman called a small interagency group together to discuss rollout. The State Department Cuba Coordinator was present but his role was limited to providing briefing materials to legislative affairs and press specialists who handled most briefings. The Secretary herself briefed Miami groups, the media and religious officials without any other State Department officials present – only the NSC accompanied her. In the end the measures were well-received, although some argued they were too little too late, while others suggested Castro hadn't done enough to be "rewarded." Overall the Administration was well pleased, especially in light of past failures. In immediate terms the Administration succeeded only in regaining some of the ground lost to Helms-Burton, but it also began to develop a constituency for change.

### Making History?

The successful formulation and implementation of the March 1998 measures emphasize that it takes time to learn to work effectively within a bureaucratic model. The key lesson was the importance of managing those bureaucratic players left outside the decision-making process but which remained crucial to the implementation. This is especially true in cases of longstanding policy means, such as the embargo on Cuba, which tend to stand as surrogates for the policy and become an end in and of themselves. The Clinton Administration effort to shift ground and reach out to Cuban people to attain the same end as the embargo (in effect to eliminate Castro) stumbled over crises of the moment and domestic pressures, but managed to recoup the ground lost and even build a constituency for modest outreach efforts. Moreover, the bureaucratic environment for

additional outreach measures has become more conducive. Hard-line Cuban-American leaders have left the stage, key bureaucratic players such as Defense and Justice have indicated support for a new look at Cuba, and the Cuba Coordinator remains an ancillary player as long as the Secretary of State and high-level Administration officials remain engaged.

Recent events suggest they will. The President's long-stated desire to leave a positive historic legacy may have been eroded by recent events, but he cannot help but remember how the Nixon balance was tilted to the positive side by the historic trip to China. A president who receives a standing ovation at the UN without even paying dues cannot be blamed for calculating that a bold Cuba initiative might move us past the endless loop of embargo enforcement toward a policy that effects real change in Cuba – and thereby truly advances our foreign policy goals. Certainly the bureaucratic groundwork for such a bold step has been laid, although in the end absent dramatic presidential action more modest steps are likely to result.

Before closing it is important to note two weaknesses in the bureaucratic model which have been tangentially mentioned in this review. One is that the thoughts and perspectives of Cuba's leaders and peoples are rarely taken into account – the model draws almost entirely on the vested interests and entrenched ideas of the players and the organizations they represent. The foreign perspective is represented only by those players, and is often depicted in order to support those players' views.

Secondly, the default mode of the bureaucracy is to resume the status quo unless there is constant and directed guidance from the highest levels. In a world with multiple crises and short deadlines, steady focus on a longer-term problem is hard to attain, and

short-term exigencies (like the shutdown and the rafter crisis) encourage players to revert to old patterns rather than sustain new initiatives. Thirdly, bureaucratic implementation of -- or refusal to implement -- key decisions can torpedo an initiative. It may be that over time the Clinton Administration has identified and managed these problems -- but it has little time to carve out new ground before a new administration enters the same learning curve.